

A PLEA FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE EIDER.¹

BY CHARLES WENDELL TOWNSEND, M. D.

THE treatment of that magnificent duck the Eider (*Somateria dresseri*) along our Atlantic coast is rapidly leading to its extermination. This duck which is locally known as "Sea Duck," "Laying Duck," "Shoreyer," "Eskimo Duck," "Moynak," and "Metic," is everywhere diminishing in numbers. In Maine they were at one time reduced to a few pairs, but, by enforcement of laws and by reservations watched over by wardens, they are beginning to increase. I believe there are only two or three cases of their breeding at the present time on the Nova Scotia coast. On the Newfoundland coast their numbers are pitifully few where once they abounded. The coast of Labrador formerly swarmed with these birds, and the islands were thickly covered with their nests. All the ornithologists from the time of Audubon to the present day who have visited this coast have bewailed the fact that the Eider was signaled out for destruction.

In 1906 Dr. G. M. Allen and I saw only about seventy of these birds on the long stretch of the eastern coast of Labrador between Battle Harbor and Hamilton Inlet. This is a region that is visited by a large number of Newfoundland fishermen in summer, and its coast is dotted with the fishing hamlets of the residents or liveyeres as they are called. The men know every nook and cranny of the coast, shoot the birds in great numbers in both fall and spring migrations, take their eggs and down whenever they find them and even shoot the setting females. In visiting their fishing traps in the height of the breeding season they often take their guns along with them so that few birds escape. North of Hamilton Inlet the Northern Eider (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) is persecuted by the Esquimaux of the Moravian villages as well as by the fishermen.

‡ The same condition of affairs exist on the southern coast where Eiders are persecuted not only by the white fishermen but also by the Montagnais Indians, who, after disposing of their furs, the

¹ Read at the meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, November 11, 1913.

result of their winter's work, cruise along the coast in sail-boat and canoe and feast on the Eider eggs and flesh.

In 1909 Mr. A. C. Bent and I found the ground about the Indians' encampments covered with Eider egg shells, and we saw Eider flesh being dried and smoked by the fires. Two men, who were ranging over the islands with pails had collected a hundred eggs in less than an hour's time. William Brewster described the method used by these Indians in 1881,—“They skirt the shores in canoes, keeping as close to land as the depth of water will permit. Meanwhile their dogs scent about among the trees quartering the ground like trained setters, and when a nest is discovered announce the fact by loud barking. The nests are usually within a few rods of the water, and the scent of the dogs is so keen that they rarely pass one. If the sitting bird can be caught or shot the opportunity is seldom neglected, for the half starved Indian neither knows nor respects considerations of mercy, or, perhaps we should call it policy,—which restrain more enlightened sportsmen on such occasions. Proceeding thus two men in a canoe will frequently ransack twenty miles of coast-line in a single day and find, probably, nearly every eider nest. The result of this systematic persecution cannot be doubtful or long delayed.”

Mr. Abbott Frazer, who was in Southern Labrador in 1884 said of this bird, “They are persecuted with relentless energy by both man and beast from the time they arrive up to the time they leave, and the countless hoards that once inhabited this coast are fast disappearing, and it will not be long before the Eider of Southern Labrador, like the Eider of Grand Manan will be but a memory of the past.”

It is natural that the fishermen and Indians should act thus, for Eider eggs are delicious eating and the flesh of the birds, at least of the female and young, is equally palatable. Both are generous in the amount of nourishment furnished. But these people are killing the goose that lays the golden egg, and the time is not far distant, where such methods prevail, before the Eider will be no more.

There is no reason why the Eider, which furnishes the valuable Eider-down of commerce, should not be made a source of considerable income, without any reduction of its natural abundance.

The principle of conservation can as well be applied to the Eider as to a forest. The conservation of the Common Eider of Europe (*Somateria mollissima*), a species that differs but very slightly from the American bird, has been practiced for many years in Iceland and Norway. The birds are rigidly protected during the nesting season and offered every encouragement. They are not allowed to be shot, and even the discharge of a gun in their vicinity is forbidden by law. Suitable nesting sites are furnished close to the houses and the birds become semi-domesticated, losing all fear of man. The people are allowed to take the eggs and down during the first of the season, but the birds are permitted to hatch out and rear a few young in order to keep up the stock. The last down is taken after the birds have left.

The following quotations from various authors show what can be done in the conservation of the Eider and what a profitable and pleasant business it may be made: "— A person," says Horrebow,¹ "as I myself have witnessed, may walk among these birds while they are sitting, and not scare them; he may even take the eggs and yet they will renew their laying as often as three times." According to the relation of Sir George Mackenzie,² "On the 8th of June at Vidöe, the Eider Ducks, at all other times of the year perfectly wild, had now assembled in great numbers to nestle. The boat, by which they approached the shore, passed through multitudes of these beautiful fowls, which scarcely gave themselves the trouble to go out of the way. Between the landing place and the Governor's house, the ground was strewn with them, and it required some caution to avoid treading on the nests. The Drakes were walking about uttering a sound very like the cooing of Doves, and were even more familiar than the common Domestic Ducks. All round the house, on the garden wall, on the roof, even in the inside of the house, and in the chapel, were numbers of ducks sitting on their nests. Such as had not been long on the nest generally left it on being approached; but those that had more than one or two eggs sat perfectly quiet, suffering us to touch them and sometimes making a gentle use of their bills to remove our hands."

¹ Quoted by Nuttall.

² Travels in Iceland, p. 126. (Quoted by Nuttall.)

Baird, Brewer and Ridgway quote from C. W. Shepard, as follows: "The islands of Vigr and Oldey are their headquarters in the northwest of Iceland. In these they live in undisturbed tranquility. They have become almost domesticated, and are found in vast multitudes, as their young remain and breed in the place of their birth. As the island (Vigr) was approached, we could see flocks upon flocks of the sacred birds, and could hear them cooing at a great distance. We landed on a rocky, wave-worn shore. It was the most wonderful ornithological sight conceivable. The Ducks and their nests were everywhere. Great, brown Ducks sat upon their nests in masses, and at every step started from under our feet. It was with difficulty that we avoided treading on some of the nests. On the coast of the opposite shore was a wall built of large stones, just above the high-water level, about three feet in height, and of considerable thickness. At the bottom, on both sides of it, alternate stones had been left out, so as to form a series of square compartments for the Ducks to nest in. Almost every compartment was occupied, and as we walked along the shore, a long line of Ducks flew out, one after the other. The surface of the water also was perfectly white with drakes, who welcomed their brown wives with loud and clamorous cooing. The house itself was a marvel. The earthen walls that surrounded it and the window embrasures were occupied by Ducks. On the ground the house was fringed with Ducks. On the turf slopes of its roof we could see Ducks, and a Duck sat on the door-scraper. The grassy banks had been cut into square patches, about eighteen inches having been removed, and each hollow had been filled with Ducks. A windmill was infested, and so were all the outhouses, mounds, rocks, and-crevices. The Ducks were everywhere. Many were so tame that we could stroke them on their nests, and the good lady told us that there was scarcely a Duck on the island that would not allow her to take its eggs without flight or fear. Our hostess told us that when she first became possessor of the island the produce of down from the Ducks was not more than fifteen pounds in a year, but that under her careful nurture of twenty years, it had risen to nearly a hundred pounds annually. Most of the eggs were taken and pickled for winter consumption, one or two only being left in each nest to hatch."

Burton writing in 1875¹ says that not even a salute was permitted to be fired at Reykjavik for fear of frightening the Eider which was there a "barn door bird" and as "tame as horse-pond geese." He says "the turf is shaven and hollowed to make the nests — and the places are marked by pegs."

Slater² says of the Common Eider that it is "resident in large numbers; especially abundant round the coast, strictly preserved by law, and in consequence very tame. In Akureyri, for instance, the old ducks with their ducklings feed along the edge of the fjord quite close to the houses and road, and take no more notice of the passers-by than domestic ducks would do — which is very pretty. In winter they pack in immense flocks. The Eider down is, of course, the property of the owner of the land, and every inducement and protection is given to the birds, as the down is a valuable article of trade." Bernhard Hantzsch³ says: "In consequence of the special protection, which man everywhere exercises over them, their numbers seem slowly to increase."

Nelson Annandale⁴ says: "The one offence against the Icelandic bird laws which a native cannot commit with impunity is the slaughter of the eider-duck.— What is more important than many laws, namely public opinion, protects the species, and there seems to be a sentimental interest in it.— Probably it is due to the great tameness of the bird, which appears actually to seek the vicinity of a human dwelling for its nesting place and to frequent those parts of the coast which are more frequented by man.— The Icelandic eider-farms are frequently situated on little islands off the coast. Small circular or oblong erections of rough stones are made among the hummocks, to protect the brooding ducks from wind and driving rain.— All the sea-fowl in these farms become exceedingly tame, as no gun is allowed to be fired and every thing liable to disturb the ducks is carefully banished. Those who know how to handle them can even stroke the backs of the ducks as they sit on their eggs.— On such farms there is a separate building or large room entirely devoted to cleaning the down.

¹ Ultima Thule or a summer in Iceland.

² Manual of the Birds of Iceland, 1901.

³ Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Vogelwelt Islands, 1905.

⁴ The Faroes and Iceland, 1906.

The apparatus consists of a series of oblong wooden frames, which may be either fixed in a horizontal position or held in the hand. Their number and size varies greatly, but in all cases the principle is the same, depending on the tenacity with which the down clings to anything on which it is thrown, partly because of its lightness and partly because of the structure of the individual feathers which compose it. Along the frames are stretched rather loosely, a number of strings which may be either of twine or of thongs of leather. The down is cast onto these near one end, and a spatula of wood or bone drawn briskly backwards and forwards over the other end. The down still clings to the strings, but all impurities, such as pieces of seaweed or grass, small stones, or coarse feathers, fall through to the ground."

Newton¹ says: "Generally the eggs and down are taken at intervals of a few days by the owners of the 'Eider-fold,' and the birds are thus kept depositing both during the whole season; but some experience is needed to insure the greatest profit from each commodity. Every Duck is allowed to hatch an egg or two to keep up the stock, and the down of the last nest is gathered after the birds have left the spot. The story of the Drake's furnishing down, after the Duck's supply is exhausted, is a fiction. He never goes near the nest." Annandale (loc. cit.) says: "It was formally the custom to take away all the down supplied by the female; but this practice was said to lead to great mortality among the ducks through exhaustion and nowadays each nest is generally rifled only once before the eggs are hatched, and then again after the young have left it."

The same conservation of the Eider exists in Norway. Stejneger² says: "All along the coast of Norway, where the bird is protected by law throughout the year, the common eider (*Somateria mollissima*), is now exceedingly common and very tame. The inhabitants take great care of the breeding birds, which often enter their houses to find suitable nesting-places, and cases are authenticated in which the poor fisherman vacated his bed in order not to disturb the female eider, which had selected it as a quiet corner wherein to raise her young. In another place the cooking of a family had to

¹ Dictionary of Birds, 1893-1896.

² Riverside Natural History.

be done in a temporary kitchen as a fanciful bird had taken up her abode on the fireplace.”

When St. Cuthbert, that holy man, went to live a lonely life on Farne Island he tamed the Eiders and they are called St. Cuthbert's ducks even to this day.

Eider-down is not only extremely light and elastic but is also one of the poorest conductors of heat. It is therefore an ideal substance for preserving warmth and is the best material for coverlets, puffs, cushions etc. Its money value is considerable and there is always a demand for it in the markets of the world.¹ The retail price in Boston at the present time of well cleaned Iceland or Norwegian eider-down is \$14 a pound. It is probable that each nest furnishes — as a very conservative estimate — from an ounce to an ounce and a third of down, therefore twelve to sixteen nests or breeding females are needed for each pound. Burton states that the annual supply of down in Iceland rose from 2,000 pounds in 1806 to 7,000 pounds in 1870. One can easily understand the great value of this product even if the producer receives only one half of the retail price. He could count on at least fifty cents a season for each breeding female in his Eider-fold.

Imagine the pleasure as well as profit that could be obtained along the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Maine if these birds were treated in the manner above described and flocked and nested about the habitations of man. Then, each dweller in suitable localities by the sea, could have his own flock of these beautiful birds, for the female is as beautiful in her modest dress of shaded and peneilled brown as is the male in his striking raiment of jet black and cream- and snow-white, delicate sea-green and dark navy-blue. The cooing notes, so long few or absent in many places, would again resound over the waters, and best of all, to the practical minded, the birds would pay well for their protection by gifts of eggs and of valuable eider-down.

How can the present senseless habit of destruction be stopped and this desirable state of affairs brought about? As a preliminary step in Labrador and Newfoundland I would suggest that a few islands scattered along the coast should be made bird reservations,

¹ The down obtained from dead Eiders, however, soon loses its elasticity and is of little value.

and carefully guarded by one or two families who live on or near the islands. These people should be allowed to take the first set of eggs and down, as well as the down left behind after the duck has hatched out the second set and has left for the season, but should not be allowed the use of fire arms, and their Eskimo dogs must be confined during the nesting season. In other words these people must not frighten the birds and must treat them kindly. The object of the experiment should be spread broadcast along the coast with the request for fair play, so as to restrain others from poaching and frightening the ducks on the reservation.

The rapidity with which the birds will respond to this treatment and the intelligence they will display in the recognition of the safety spots will surprise the people. This is the case wherever bird reservations are established. At Ipswich, Massachusetts, the shores of a small, protected pond are thronged with shore birds of many species which display almost no fear of man, while on the neighboring beaches, where they are shot, they are very wary. In the city of Boston the Charles River Basin and Jamaica Pond are the resort of numerous ducks that pay but little attention to the people, while in the sea and ponds nearby, where shooting is allowed, the ducks show their usual wildness.

It is useless to pass laws if they are not observed or if the sentiment of the community is against them. This reform, which will be of such great value to our northern sea-coast, can only be accomplished by education, and these bird reservations with their Eider-farms will be one of the best means to that end. It is for this purpose that I have written this and have quoted the convincing experiences of the natives of Iceland and Norway; and I hope that through the Moravians and Dr. Grenfell and the Catholic and other missionaries of Labrador, and the factors of the Hudson's Bay Company's Posts, and the independent fur-traders, and through the press of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, and especially through the Governor General of Newfoundland and the Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, to all of whom I intend to send this little tract, the people will understand the great need and value of the conservation of the Eider.